

Light In The Darkness

by XSoleadoX

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Rumpelstiltskin/Mr. Gold

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Summary: Imprisoned by The Evil Queen, Rumplestiltskin thought there was no hope. But then Belle is brought to him; Belle, which he thought was deadâ€¦ They are reunited, even if Regina puts them both through hell, forcing Belle to whip him. However, Belle is going to do everything in her might to free them both. Together they devise an escape plan, but will they succeed?

1. Together through the dark

A/N: There are descriptions of whipping here, but they aren't that very bad I think; I tried to make it as much not-gore as possible. But, if it's not your thing, you can safely skip through those parts, it's not pivotal to read them. (Just bear in mind that just at the moment when the second whipping scene ends [in Ch3], there's an important dialogue there).******

>Despite the whipping and overall grim position they're in, there is some fluff and sweetness here. And with their love giving them motivation, their situation is more hopeful than it could first seem. I'm not saying more. :)****

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****Beta:** the most wonderful
NicoleMuenchSeidel******

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Orange glow of the afternoon sun came through the bars, softly illuminating the murky dungeon. The light was faint, but bright

enough to see clearly around. If someone was to be there, they would be able to make out the figure of a man that stood in the middle of the room, held up by the hefty chains. A prisoner. His arms were brought above his head by a metal chain, the wrists clasped tightly into a heavy shackles. His silhouette was hung over, the knees bent slightly, too tired to support the weight anymore, but forced to do just that; another pair of shackles fastened around the ankles made sure that man won't be able to move his legs an inch. His greenish-grey skin reflected rays of the shining sun, the beads of sweat glistening in the light. He was stripped down, clad only in a pair of old cotton pants, the only other thing clothing his body being a cuff made of dark leather, enclosing his wrist just below the right shackle. There were a goosebumps forming on his skin from the coldness of the dungeon, and a shiver run through man's body every now and then. The muscles of his arms and legs, pained after hours of being strained, twitched occasionally. The man long since has given up attempts to try to bring some relief for his limbs, every movement only causing more pain to the tensed muscles.

He was too tired to do anything than just breathe, and even that activity was coming with an effort. His head hung low, brown curly hair falling over his face, greasy and tangled from days of not taking care of it. His chin rested against his chest, as he was taking shallow breaths, trying to ignore the pain shooting through his strained muscles. With his eyes closed, he may have appeared to be sleeping, but even a simple rest was impossible for his aching body.

Though his face looked impassive, his mind was ridden with erratic thoughts; images of blue sparkling eyes and the sweetest of smiles, the image of plush lips approaching closer and closer to his, image of tears and face stricken with heartbreak, image of a different face saying, "She died. She threw herself from the tower", the feeling of anger and despair at looking and not finding, the image of the same cruel face but throwing a blue liquid at him, the terrifying feeling of not being able to move, the echo of the dark laughter and the horrible words that followed, "I didn't lie, she truly is dead, as dead as one can be, and it's all because of you. And you will never be able to get her back; dead is dead, remember?" Heart squeezing painfully in a mixture of anguish, guilt and despair. Feeling of being dragged, the sight of bars, and then another bars and darkness and cold and the stench of mildew. Then fear; the unfading dread combined with the piercing emptiness, coming out right from the heart and spreading all within him, squeezing his insides and making him want to vomit.

He fought back tears, his body jerking for a second when he shook with the vivid nightmares. They invaded him day after day, but how many days exactly, he was not sure. He kept a count, but since he he's been put into the chains a few days back, his tired brain lost all coherent thought, and so all have blended into an one long day; full of hunting memories and heart-clenching sadness.

She was dead, she was forever gone. And he was imprisoned; trapped and not able to escape.

Suddenly the door opened with a loud screech and his head jerked up. He squinted his eyes at the woman that appeared in the doorway; she was clad in a stiff royal dress, as black as her heart, her dark hair combed high and a strong makeup underlining the cruel features of her

face. _Reginaâ€|_ Oh how he would like to kill her for all she has done; rip her heart out and crush it, make her payâ€|

The feeling of anger rose inside him, as he watched The Evil Queen step inside and look at him with a spark in her eye, a dark amusement surrounding her person. He prepared himself, stilling against the chains and clenching his jaw, ready to endure her another cruel mocking. She would laugh at him, threaten him, try to provoke him and laugh even more at his inability to move against the shackles, and eventually she would leave, just to come by the next day. He knew what she wanted from him, but he wasn't about to give it to her. He could endure this humiliation, until she would finally get bored and let him out, or would find another way to get from him what she wanted, and what _he_ wasn't willing to give her.

He glared at her figure, ready to cast at her a dark joke, the attempt at humor the only thing that was left for him to do at the vile situation he was in. But just as he was opening his mouth, two guards followed Regina into the room, dragging a young woman with them; a woman yelling and kicking and trying to jerk herself away from their forceful arms; a woman with a voice of the most original accent, the one that was so familiar to him, and his heart made a silly hopeful loop upon hearing it now. But it couldn't beâ€| It couldn't. She was dead. She was _deadâ€|_

Men threw the woman inside, and she fell on her knees, the air escaping her lungs in a whimper. Then the door closed behind the leaving guards, and he focused his eyes at the woman on the ground, trying to make out her features, but her face was obscured from the view by the mess of chestnut curls. Apprehensively he watched Regina approach the woman and yank her upwards by pulling at her hair, the young woman crying out in pain.

And then he could see. It was her. Truly her.

Rumplestiltskin felt his heart stop in his chest, a flicker of hope building in him and a warm feeling spreading thorough him, the joy and relief upon seeing her alive overshadowing the current grim reality.

"Belleâ€|" His voice cracked at that one word, and she looked up at him with big blue disbelieving eyes.

"Rumple!"

Regina's gleeful laugh could be heard in that moment, and the joy and relief escaped Rumplestiltskin as fast as they came, leaving him furious as he realized the truth.

"You lied to me!" He glared at Regina and jerked against the chains, cursing inwardly at the damned shackles that prevented him from going to Regina and snapping her neck.

"Youâ€| you vile witch! You told me she died! Youâ€| You told meâ€|" His voice cracked, and he wasn't able to finish, having to swallow the sudden lump in his throat and blink back the tears that threatened to spill.

"Oh, of course I told you that, imp. Were you _really_ thinking I was being sincere?" She laughed again, pushing Belle and he reflexively

wanted to reach for her, to catch her. But he couldn't, and he watched with a heavy heart as she fell to the ground again, crying out in pain when her hands scratched against the hard ground and the uneven surface wounded her delicate skin.

The grim realization hit him, when he recalled the last months. Belle leaving the castle, Regina coming to him to tell him Belle had killed herself, his denial and desperate searching for any trace of Belle only to finally find not her but Regina. He was sure then that she had lied, but she ensured him she didn't, that Belle truly was dead. He didn't want to believe it, but as he sat lonely in the dark dungeon cell, alone with his thoughts, he finally gave up hope and believed in Regina's words. But now he understood. Belle was alive and fine all this time, Regina having to sabotage his efforts, until finally, just like an idiot, he fell into her trap. She told him this lie to shake him, to make him so desperate upon losing Belle, that in his searches he would become careless enough to walk right into Regina's snares. She thought he would be so weak, so desperate, that he wouldn't care anymore and just give her what she wanted. But he was stronger than she had thought, and now, when he finally knew the whole truth, she was going to pay for everything; for tricking him, for imprisoning him, for kidnapping his darling Belle. Just as soon as he is free.

"What do you want?" He spat out, tearing his eyes away from Belle and focusing his angry glare at Regina. He tried to appear threatening, didn't want to reveal any more weakness to her. It was pointless surely, she had to already know what Belle meant to him, otherwise she wouldn't have kidnapped her, or used her to trick him in the first place.

"You know exactly what I want, Rumplestiltskin." Her voice became serious now, the laugh dying, as she looked upon him with a cold stare. He responded with the same expression.

"And you know I won't give it to you, dearie. Why did you bring Belle here? She has nothing to do with any of this."

"Ah, here's where you are wrong. I have to say, I underestimated you. You have proved to have more resolve than I have anticipated, but my patience is already wearing thin. In a few days at most, you won't be so stubborn anymore." He looked at her in confusion, wondering what she could possibly have in mind. Would she threaten to kill Belle if he didn't give her what she wanted? Would she resolve to hurting her, unless he gives in? She could surely do that, and suddenly a blood-freezing fear surged through him.

But as he looked back at Regina's face, it became clear she had different plans. She waved a hand in the air, and after the crimson smoke has cleared, with a downing dread he noticed a long whip in her hand. Somewhere beside him he heard Belle's gasp, but his eyes were fixed at the thing in Regina's hands. He tried to keep his face impassive, to not let any emotion show there, but inside he was boiling. Was she going to use it to torture Belle? His darling, delicate Belle? He wouldn't have thought twice about giving Regina what she had wanted, even if it meant sacrificing his own soul. Belle's safety was the only thing that mattered to him right now.

But Regina surprised him once more, as she threw the whip at Belle,

the girl barely catching it. He narrowed his eyes in confusion and as he looked over at Belle, she wore the matching expression. They both heard Regina's evil cackle as she moved closer to them.

"You see, Rumple. I could simply kill her, or torture her in front of you. I could send my guard to have _fun _with her, while you watch. Butâ€¦ I think I would enjoy more watching _you _being hurt, _you _paying for all the little tricks you pulled with me, trying to dissuade me from my quest of revenge." Her eyes were furious as she looked at him, and he felt a cold shiver run through his back. His heart beat like crazy, and his breath became shallow. This was not Regina he used to know. There was nothing in her of the kind woman he had first met all those years ago, a woman so afraid that she would end up in her mother's shoes. She had ended up much worse, it seemed.

She shoved Belle behind his back, and she herself retreated to the door, leaning against it and crossing her arms under her chest. He raced his mind for words, for something to say to try to dissuade Regina from doing it.

"Regina, pleaseâ€¦ You don't have to do it. You don't have to be so evilâ€¦ You were once a good person, with a good heart."

"Shut up! You made me into this! It's all your work, and now you will see the seeds of it!" She yelled at him and then turned to Belle.

"Go on, hit him!" But Belle just stood there, hesitating and shaking in fear. Regina glowered at her, leaning forward as if she wanted to approach her.

"Do it, or I will take care of it myself, and believe me dear, it's gonna be much more unpleasant for him if _I _am going to do it." She hissed through the clenched teeth, and Belle gulped. She knew the Queen wasn't joking. There was no room to maneuver, no way to win. She had to do as the Queen commanded.

With a shaking hand she raised the whip and, holding up her breath, she made the first swing. Rumplestiltskin clenched his teeth to not make a sound as the first strike came.

Tears run down Belle's cheeks as she did another swing, and another. Her heart was breaking upon hurting her Rumple like that, and she tried to keep the strikes as light as possible, and to not hit the same place twice. But it only displeased Regina and she made few angry steps towards Belle.

"It seems I have to show you how to use it, after all!" Belle's eyes grew large, and Rumplestiltskin, quite immobile thus far, stirred and looked fearfully at the approaching Queen.

"No! Pleaseâ€¦" Belle moved backwards, clutching the whip to her chest, and Regina stopped, glaring at her with her dark eyes.

"Then start hitting him, instead of patting!"

As Regina retreated back to the door, Belle took a deep breath, and tried to calm her shaking hands and racing heart.

Just days ago she was saying goodbye to Princess Aurora, Prince Phillip and a female warrior Mulan that accompanied them. Just days ago she stood on a hill, looking in the direction when she knew miles away lied the Dark Castle, and was saying into the air the promise for Rumple that she is coming back. And now she was here; kidnapped by the Evil Queen, locked in a dungeon with Rumplestiltskin, and forced to whip him. Her mind could barely wrap itself around it, and she had no time to think over the situation, of how Rumple came to be here and why couldn't he escape.

Hearing Regina's impatient reminder, she braced herself and took a swing. She hit harder this time, and Rumplestiltskin stirred, reflexively trying to run away from the heavy blow. Belle heard Regina cackle gleefully, and tears run down her face in a stream. She took another hard swing, and another, feeling within herself Rumple's pain; it pierced through her heart, squeezed her lungs and pulled at her stomach. She felt like she could throw up at any moment.

Rumplestiltskin still kept his jaws clenched and was determined to not give Regina the satisfaction of hearing him cry out. The pain was horrible, but his face stayed impassive, and he tried to bring up in his mind all the distracting thoughts he could think of, but with each strike they were fleeing his mind, and with each minute it was harder and harder for him to keep up the resolve. His skin stung where it came into contact with the whip, his tongue most likely bled from his biting down at it, his body shook from the pain, and he was so incredibly tired. He wished all this was just a nightmare, and he would open his eyes, just to see Belle's concerned face, her soft hand stroking his own and forcing him to drink down a cup of water; it had happened several times at the Dark Castle, when he attempted to sleep, only to be invaded by horrible nightmares and wake up with a scream. Waking up to Belle's lovely face wasn't that bad, and if he was being honest with himself; it was mostly the reason why he even attempted to sleep at all. He hated the fact that all this right now wasn't just another of his horrible dreams. He hated that he let himself fall into a trap. He hated that Regina dragged Belle into it. He hated himself for being a weak naïve idiot. He hated Regina for being such a cruel cold-hearted bitch. He hated _all this_.

With a heavy heart Belle took another swing, her arm hurting from all the exertion. The whip landed over a previous bleeding cut with a loud whizz, and Rumple cried out, not able to keep quiet anymore. Sobbing, Belle looked pleadingly at Regina, but woman just laughed and motioned for her to continue.

Moments following were a fuzzy for Rumplestiltskin. As if through the fog he heard Belle's ugly sobs, intertwined with the swish of the whip, and his cries of pain. He didn't know how much time had passed, his body convulsing in pain and heart beating frantically. He let the tears fell down his face freely, not caring anymore to keep up any remaining dignity.

Suddenly he heard footsteps, and the next thing he knew, a cool fingers wrapped around his chin and were raising it up, until he looked up into the Queen's cold black eyes. He tried to gather his resolve and glare at her, forcing the tears to not fall anymore and clenching his jaw to not cringe at the next strike. But it was lighter than the previous ones and then it stopped. Regina tore her eyes from him and glared at Belle.

"Did I tell you to stop?"

"N.. no!" Belle's voice was quivering when she answered, and his heart clenched for her. He could endure the torture, but she shouldn't have been here, she shouldn't have been forced to do it. He wanted to say something to Regina, to threaten her, but then a strike came and another one, and Regina smirked at him, seeing his resolve melting. Finally he gave up, letting his tears run again and casting his eyes down, hanging his head in defeat. Regina cackled gleefully upon seeing that, and waved an arm at Belle, telling her to stop.

"Now, now!" That's the Dark One I enjoy watching." She lightly slapped his cheek in amusement, all the while laughing with a cruel mirth. He was too weak to even attempt to glare at her anymore, and could just hope she would leave soon. Her self-indulgent glee didn't last long fortunately, and after some more mocking, she walked over to the door. She stopped at the entrance and turned back to them, and as she waved her hand in the air, the magic opened the shackles and Rumplestiltskin fell down on the ground with a grunt, his limbs a numb mess.

"I will be back tomorrow, imp. I'm sure you gonna _love_ what's to come." She laughed once more and turned around, leaving the cell and locking it with her magic, her dark laughter still audible for another long moment, becoming quieter and quieter, until it finally dissipated completely.

Belle dropped the whip at the floor, finally able to move, now when the Queen has left. She ran to Rumplestiltskin, kneeling down next to him and cradling his head into her hands, mindful to not touch his wounded back.

"Rumple!" Oh, Rumple!" I'm sorry!" I'm so sorry!" She wasn't able to keep her sobs inside, and she dissolved into a crying mess. He was weak, and bleeding, the wounds at his bare back angrily red and contrasting with his greenish skin, obviously being very painful, and it was all her doing. She had caused him all this pain, and she hated it, but she could do nothing to stop it. Her heart clenched painfully in her chest, taking away her breath, and she hiccuped, taking shallow breaths as she tried to catch the air. There were arms suddenly around her, a face nuzzling her hair, a firm body pressing against her.

"Shh, Belle!" Don't cry. It's not your fault, it's not."

He tried to comfort her, while it should be her comforting him, and it only made her cry more. She felt his hands run lightly over her back, stroking into a slow calming circles. Belle put her hands around his neck, somewhere he wasn't hurt, and snuggled closer to him, resting her head against his heart. His heartbeat was fast, but it felt comforting at the same time. Despite the low temperature in the dungeon his body was warm, and she slid one hand down to his bare chest, feeling it wet from the sweat. Absentmindedly she moved her hand lower, running her fingers up and down his stomach, and she felt him stilling and holding up his breath. After a moment he relaxed again, and resumed whispering comforting words. Belle couldn't make them out through his stifled voice, but it didn't matter. Hearing his peculiar voice, feeling his hand gently but firmly stroking her back,

feeling the heat of his body seep into her, feeling his chest raise and fall in the rhythm of his gradually slowing heartbeat, it was all calming and comforting, and eventually Belle found herself able to breathe more freely, as her tears dried off and the hiccups dissipated.

She placed a soft kiss right over his heart, before moving away a bit, just enough to look up into his face. It was covered in dust and there were light paths on his cheeks - the traces of his dried tears, and she imagined her own face looked quite alike. But though he was in pain, he looked at her with such gentleness and affection, that it melted her heart. He didn't seem able to let go of her, and his hands stayed at her sides, not letting her move any farther away. With disbelief shining through his overlarge amber eyes, he slowly touched her shoulders, her cheeks, her neck, and she let him. She herself couldn't quite keep her hands to herself, and settled them at his shoulders, idly digging her fingers in and massaging his tensed muscles.

"How did you get here, Rumpel?" It pained her to talk, to break the suspended moment, this babble, wherein for a moment, they weren't in the Queen's horrible dungeon, but someplace else, where it was just him and her, and their sweet longing touches.

"It's a long story Belle." He sighed, moving forward to rest his forehead against hers. Before, he would have never dared to do any of those things; he has always tried to keep his distance from her, to not let her penetrate the barrier he put around his heart. But right now he didn't care about any of it; he was hurting and scared and lonely. He needed her more than ever, and it seemed that she too needed this closeness just as much as he did.

"She told me you're dead. I thought she lied, I went to look, to see for myself. I was careless, and I fell right into her trap." His voice was a broken whisper as he told her that, and Belle had to try hard to not start crying again. The anger boiled in her; how that witch could do that to him? She should pay for it! She should pay!

Belle sighed, clearing her head from the dark thoughts, and buried her hands in Rumpelstiltskin's hair. She has always imagined it to be a soft floof, but right now it was greasy and tangled. She didn't mind that though, and stroked her hands through it, scratching his scalp slowly, hoping he would like it. If his pleased little sigh was any indication, he did like it indeed.

"Belle! How did she capture you?" He asked in a hushed voice, moving away from her slightly, and she instantly missed the warmth of his breath against her face, even if it was rather unpleasant from days of not cleaning his teeth.

"She suddenly appeared in the woods, when I was on my way back to you. She had several soldiers with her and they grabbed me!" She gulped, remembering the horrific moment; the painful grasp of the men that hold her, being pushed into the cage, and the Evil Queen laughing at her pitiful screams!

"You! You were coming back to me?" He looked at her with big disbelieving eyes, and Belle smiled, the images of her capture dissipating from her mind in an instant.

"Of course I was, Rumpel. I had enough time to think, and I realizedâ€¦ I didn't want to give up on you." She told him sincerely, feeling tears gather at her eyes, and she quickly wiped them away. His face stayed baffled for a moment, but then she saw something new blossoming there.

"Oh, Belleâ€¦ You shouldn't have looked back, I don't deserve it." With his eyes cast down he looked so sad and small, and Belle's heart broke a little upon seeing him like this. She gently grasped his cheek in her hand and prompted him to raise his head, and when their eyes finally met, she gave him her warmest smile.

"I will never give up on you, Rumpel. Just accept it." She flicked her finger across his nose playfully, and for a second got lost in his intense gaze, as the sadness dissipated from his eyes, to get replaced by a spark of hope, and a smile started stretching his lips before he could even think about wrestling it down.

"But, it's not a place for this conversation. We should talk when we come back home, safely."

He nodded in agreement, and for a moment they just looked at each other, before his face slowly fell down again and he sighed hopelessly.

"We will get out of here, Rumpel, don't worry." She tried to comfort him, but he shook his head.

"I can't use magic, Belleâ€¦ See, this cuff-" He rose his right hand and only now she noticed a black leathery cuff put around his wrist. "- It keeps away my magic. And without my magic, we won't be able to get out." He shook his head at her miserably.

"I am not able to take it off myself, but maybe youâ€¦"

Without hesitation Belle grabbed his hand into hers and reached for the cuff, but as she pulled, nothing happened. The bracelet was still exactly where it was, and Belle pulled harder, but still to no effect. She heard Rumpelstiltskin's resigned sigh and looked up at him in confusion.

"She had to enchant it. You won't be able to take it offâ€¦ No one willâ€¦" He looked tired and completely resigned, his eyes half-closed and his usually high pitched voice now low and hoarse. Belle grabbed his shoulders firmly and shook him, determination painting on her face.

"I won't give up, Rumpel! And you can't give up either! We will find a way to get out. There HAS to be a way!" But he was barely hearing her, nodding at her numbly and moving down, until his head rested at her leather-clad lap, and he had barely the presence of mind to wonder why was she wearing pants. He stretched his heavy limbs, and then curled up against her, careful to keep his back away from the dirty ground.

With a sigh Belle lowered her hand to his head, petting him gently.

"I will free you, Rumpel, I promise. I won't let this witch torment

seemed that the gruesome reality had yet to reach her mind, and he gave her a faint smile, knowing she would soon realize.

Sure enough, he watched with a breaking heart as the smile disappeared from her face, her eyes turning big and scared, and she sprung herself up to a sitting position, casting a worried glance at the door and sighing with relief upon seeing it being closed and no one besides them in the cell.

"Belle?" He started, trying to draw her attention back at him. As she moved her eyes to his face and tried to send him a reassuring smile, his heart clenched. Oh, his brave Belle!

"How are you feeling?" He asked, trying to keep his voice impassive despite the big concern welling up inside him, and she gave him this little smirk and knowing look, ones she gave him each time he expressed care towards her and then tried to mask it.

"Physically, I'm a bit sore and numb, but alright otherwise. How about you, Rumple?" She looked at him with worried eyes, trying to get a glimpse of his back, but he moved it out of the range of her eyes.

"Don't worry about me, sweetheart. I will be fine." He ensured her, the endearment slipping past his lips before he could stop it. In truth he didn't feel good at all; his back hurt and stung, his head still pounded, and he barely could feel his arms, his muscles still painfully strained. He told her none of that though, not wanting to worry her more than she already was.

Belle smiled sadly upon him, running her hands over his face, stroking his cheeks with such a tender manner, he wished they were someplace else, at his castle or maybe on the beach, somewhere where he could truly enjoy her touches and closeness, no threat hanging above them. But if not for this dire situation, would she even dare to bestow such touches upon him? No, it was not the time to wonder about such things, he reminded himself.

His stomach suddenly gave a loud rumble, and he looked at Belle embarrassed.

"Is she even feeding you?" Her face was full of worry and concealed anger as she looked at him, and he considered if he should lie.

"At the beginning, yes! But she hasn't in the past days, since she, uh! chained me!" He admitted truthfully, casting his eyes at the floor beside them, suddenly feeling ashamed. "But don't worry, I'm sure she will bring some food for you, Belle. She doesn't seem intent on killing you, so I doubt she would let you starve to death." He tried to reassure her, not wanting her to worry.

"I'm not worried about myself, Rumple. I'm worried about you. You've been here for who knows how long!" For a moment he looked at her blankly, until finally his sluggish brain understood that she was worried about him, and with that startling realization he rushed to put her at ease.

"Oh! Don't worry about me, Belle. I am still the Dark One, so the hunger can't kill me. And Regina knows that." Her face lightened a bit, and he tentatively pressed his hands against her warm cheeks.

"It is quite an uncomfortable feeling, but it's really not any worse torture thanâ€¦" He didn't finish, suddenly realizing that what he intended to say to lift up her spirits, was indeed not the right thing to say. Belle's face fell down in a second, her eyes growing big and wet at the reminiscent of the previous day, and he was sure her tears would fall any second now.

He felt horrible, sick at stomach. What Regina did, it was a discomfort for him and it was painful, but it wasn't anything he couldn't bear. He was not anywhere as weak as Regina thought he was. But Belleâ€¦ She was a delicate flower. She didn't deserve any of this. But just now when she needed his help, he was powerless. He could do nothing to get her out of Regina's clutches, to return her to home safelyâ€¦

Feeling hopeless and angry at the same time, he looked down, the sight of her teary eyes too much for him to bear at the moment. And just as he slid his gaze lower, his eyes somewhat fell upon her chest, and with a start he noticed the little pendant that hung there.

"You still wear that pendant..." He said in amazement. He thought she cast the gift away after he had throw her out from the castleâ€¦

"Of course I do, Rumple. You gave it to me, I couldn't just throw it away." She said, looking at him in confusion about his sudden change of subject, but feeling grateful at the same time.

He looked at her face with anew revelation, suddenly feeling the flicker of hope igniting. A chance to escape has just presented itself to them, and he felt ecstatic about the prospect. The plan started to form in his mind, and so focused on his thoughts he was, that he didn't notice Belle's confused expression upon seeing his face suddenly lit up like that.

"Rumple?"

"Hm? Oh. Yes. I have a plan!"

"You do?" Belle felt happy hearing that, and seeing how he nodded his head with a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, she squeezed his shoulders in excitement. "Come on, tell me!"

He grinned at her and moved a finger to her pendant, twirling the little golden strand around his finger and raising it up so she could look at it.

"It's not an ordinary pendant. I made it myself from my own golden strands, and enchanted it. It's a very special pendant Belle, andâ€¦ that's the real reason why I have given it to youâ€¦" He suddenly felt guilty, and turned his head at the side to avoid her eyes. She didn't notice that though, too curious about all this to wonder over his motives for the gift.

"What does it do?"

"I uhâ€¦ I put some spells around the castle's grounds, once you came thereâ€¦ You couldn't run away, the barrier would have stopped you." He admitted and gulped as her eyes momentarily narrowed at him. "I simply couldn't risk having you run away, dearie." He said in a

sing-sang voice, waggling a playful finger before her nose, but Belle simply shook her head with a soft smile.

"Of course. So, what about that pendant?"

He breathed in relief, seeing that she wasn't angry with him.

"As you remember, I gave it to you before I let you go to the village. It's enchanted, so that you can cross with it through any protection spells I cast around the castle. Which also comes in handy right now. After Regina told me that you died-" he swallowed a lump in his throat, the words still hard for him to say. Belle resumed stroking his face, and he sent her a small brave smile. "When I was away investigating, I cast a powerful protection spells around the castle. I thought that Regina may be up to something, so I didn't want her to have a free access while I was away for so long. I never returned to take down those spells. But with this pendant - you would be able to enter." He explained, and Belle opened her mouth in shock. Then she realized something and looked around in fear.

"What if the Queen overhears us? What if she takes the pendant?"

"Worry not. It's enchanted to only work for you. Even if she takes it, it will be completely useless in her hands." He assured her, and Belle nodded with relief.

"Alright, so let's assume I enter the castle. What then?"

"Do you remember that one time when you startled me in my workshop and I spilled the potion over a book?"

Of course she remembered that. It was funny when to think of it from the perspective of time, but back then it was rather unpleasant; she had thought she ruined his book and the potion, and that he would be angry. He had indeed yelled at her and told her to get out because she was a walking disaster, but she had ignored his tantrum and insult, and instead insisted that she would help him. He had eventually relented, and they cleaned the mess together. She had apologized countless times, until he had told her to finally stop doing it, and send her off to fetch a fresh tea. She could see that he wasn't angry anymore though, and they never spoke of the mishap again. Belle smiled at the memory for a moment, but then narrowed her eyes at Rumpel in confusion.

"I do remember that, but what?"

"Do you remember how that book looked like?"

"Umm yes, I think so. It was..."

"No, don't tell me." He hushed her and looked around, half expecting to find Regina in the shadows. Glad that they were still alone, he turned his eyes back at Belle. "You need to find it. There is a spell in there. You will know what spell I mean, once you find it. You need to cast it, the book will tell you how."

Belle looked at him even more confused now. He was talking vaguely, and though she somewhat understood why, she wished he could be more precise. Knowing that he wouldn't be, she nodded in

agreement.

"Okay, find a book, got it. But I still don't understand what I'm actually looking for, what will get you out of here."

He sighed deeply and moved to sit more comfortably, running his hand through his hair, while other tentatively encircled her waist. Belle followed suit, sitting by his side, and waiting patiently for him to speak. He finally sighed again and looked at her, his eyes scanning hers closely.

"You see, there is a thing Regina wants. And ironically, it is the same thing that would be able to cut through this cuff. It's uhâ€¦ it's a dagger." He admitted, but Belle still didn't understand.

"A dagger? Why would Regina want a knife?"

"Not just a knife, Belle. It's uhâ€¦ It's a special dagger. Itâ€¦ holds power over me. But it also can cut through any magic, like the one Regina cast over the bracelet."

Belle's brow narrowed as she mulled over his words. _"Holds power over meâ€¦"_

"Do you mean thatâ€¦ this daggerâ€¦ you're bound to it, or something like that?" Rumple licked his lips, and Belle noted how hard he was breathing. Eventually he nodded in confirmation, and looked away from her. It was obviously hard for him to talk about it, and Belle decided not to pressure him. She didn't need to know the details, especially if he wasn't willing to reveal them on his own.

She reached for his hand, squeezing it in a reassuring manner. He trust her with getting this dagger and not letting Regina take it, and that was really big, and made her heart swell with only more affection for him.

"I don't know where it is though."

"You do. Remember the locked room? The only one you had absolutely no access to?" Belle nodded. Hard to forget such room, really. One time when she had tried to open it, when she didn't yet know she wasn't allowed to, Rumplestiltskin had found her and berated her for good five minutes for trying to open the door. She had never approached that room again after that.

Rumplestiltskin looked at her pointedly, and she understood why he brought that up. His dagger was there; that's why he never let her in, and why the door seemed to be sealed by magic.

"But how I would get in?"

A strange expression came over Rumplestiltskin's face, but it quickly passed, leaving him looking only tired and somewhat defeated. Belle was concerned about him, but before she could say something, he answered her.

"The same way you will walk into the castle."

Belle opened her mouth in surprise. Did it mean that she had access to that room since when he had given her the necklace? Did he trust

her enough to know she wouldn't use the dagger against him if she had found it and discovered what it did, or did he know that she wasn't foolish enough to get anywhere near that room after his reaction the last time she had tried that?

"There's a protection spell over it, and there's only one way you would be able to touch the dagger. Now, listen carefully." He leaned in a bit closer to her, taking a deep breath and lowering his voice. "In my workshop you will find a small ebony wooden box, that's hidden in a drawer of my desk. The key to the box isâ€¦ Is hidden where our first memory is hidden too. Use the key, open the box, and inside it's a vial. Use it on the dagger and you will be able to take it. Do you understand?"

He was talking in a rushed whisper, and Belle tried hard to indeed understand him. She could make out the words, but she barely got their meaning. What did he mean by _where our first memory is hidden_? She nodded to indicate that she understood, even if she had no idea what he meant and prayed she would be able to figure it out once she's in there.

"I'm sorry I can't be more precise Belleâ€¦ But I need to take into account that Regina may be spying on us. There are powerful protection spells around my castle, but Regina still may find a way to break themâ€¦ I can't risk just handing over to her the exact instructions as to where my dagger is and how to get it."

"I understand that Rumple, I do."

He nodded with relief crossing his features and moved his hands up, running his fingers through her hair. Belle closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying his soft touch, but not before noticing his wistful expression.

"Oh, Belleâ€¦ I hope you will succeed." He whispered, and her eyes opened, looking upon him with affection.

"I won't let you down, Rumple." She promised, her voice solemn, and when he nodded, his features calming and a tiny smile sprouting out as he kept looking at her, she put her hands around his neck and drew him into a hug. She planted a light kiss just under his chin, and feeling him snuggling closer to her, she kissed him again. Her hands ran along the back of his neck, down to his shoulders and to the collarbone, where she stroked his bare chest, enjoying its hairless smoothness, all the while gently gliding her mouth over the pebbled skin at the side of his neck.

"My sweet Belleâ€¦" His voice cracked at her name, and she felt him sniff her hair and plant a sweet kiss at the top of her head. She had loved him for so long, and because a stupid misunderstanding they were separated. Numerous times, she had run scenarios through her head, trying to think of every possible reaction her return could cause in him, but being in this situation would have never crossed her mind. She dreamed of having him in her arms, of kissing him, of having him kiss her too, but not while they were planning an escape from a dungeon of a cruel witch. She regretted now more than ever that she had left the castle, that she didn't try to convince him of the genuineness of her feelings. Maybe if she did, maybe then none of this would have happenedâ€¦ No, she couldn't be doing that now. It was not the time nor place, to think of the past and what could have

been if they had made a different decisions.

Reluctantly she moved away from him, knowing that the Queen could come in any moment, and he looked at her with soft eyes, his amber orbs flicking down to her lips for a moment.

"But how do I even get out of here, Rumple? Would you be able to convince the Queen to release me?"

He looked back up at her, his face taking on a serious look.

"Yes, I will. Trust me, Belle. That's not the tricky part. The tricky part is, that she may follow you and try to take the dagger from you. That's why you need to remember of that book Belle." She nodded solemnly, understanding the stakes. If their plan was to fail, she would die and Rumple would forever be the Queen's prisoner. She couldn't make a mistake here, not when so much was in the play.

"There is one more thing Belle." He looked at her with such a deep sadness, that it actually scared her. "We need to convince the Queen about my defeatâ€¦ So, you can't be holding back this time Belle. She needs to see that I can't take it anymore, that we are both too devastated to keep up the resistance."

Belle shook her head at him in disbelief.

"Rumpleâ€¦"

"Belle, please. It will hurt, like hell, but none of those wounds wouldn't be able to kill me. She let you go on me a bit soft yesterday, but she won't do that again now."

Belle felt tears well up in her eyes, and he was quick to wipe them away. She knew he was right. The Queen will demand hard strikes again, and this time, she could really lose her patience if Belle tried to refuse. And they couldn't anger her, not now, when they needed the Queen to release her.

She kissed the tip of Rumplestiltskin's nose and rested her forehead against his, cradling his head in her hands.

"I will do itâ€¦"

3. Setting the wheels into motion

****Summary:** The escape plan is created, now they just have to put it into motion. First however, Rumple will have to endure another whipping.******

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The hour they dreaded had finally come, when the door swung open and the Evil Queen entered, her long stiff black dress combined with the dark highly combed hair, making her look royal and dangerous. The moment Rumplestiltskin and Belle spotted the Queen, he felt Belle's body start to quiver. Instinctively, he tightened his arms around her in a protective manner. It was pointless, he knew, but all the same,

he hoped it would soothe her nerves at least a little.

As he glared up at Regina, he noticed the way her lip curled up in disgust at seeing them cuddled up like that, but she seemed to shake herself out of it rather quickly, her face forming a fake interest, making her look like a cat that just spotted its prey.

"Tell me, did my two lovebirds had a good sleep, hmm?" She cackled, obviously mocking them. Rumple bit his tongue to not snarl at her, and when neither of them answered at the provocation, Regina's face tightened in anger.

"Just get over with it, Regina. You know you won't break me." Rumplestiltskin spat out, looking her right in the eye, and not relenting when she burst out into a cold laugh, the sound eerily resonating from the stone walls.

"Very well, then. We'll see how long you will keep up being this stubborn, imp." With a wave of her hand, he was suddenly in the middle of the room, his hands up in the air and cuffed into the heavy, cold metal shackles, his feet in another pair of them, holding him upright and in one place. With another wave of Regina's hand, a whip appeared in Belle's hand, the same that she had used the previous night, and to Belle's horror - it was still covered in Rumple's blood.

At seeing her expression, the Queen cackled gleefully again, and as Belle rose to her feet, she felt herself squeezing the whip in anger. Realizing what she was doing, she took a deep breath, and reverted her eyes at Rumple's scarred back. She wanted to tell the Queen a few harsh words, but antagonizing her now wouldn't do any good for either of them. She had to stick to the plan.

"Now, you know what to do, girl."

Belle stepped closer to Rumplestiltskin and took a better grip of the whip. She briefly glanced at the Queen, just to see her leaning back against the door like she did the previous day, and looking at them with an expression a child wears upon seeing for the first time a festival full of colorfully clothed people performing all types of amazing tricks. Except the Queen was not looking at the joyful festival, but at the scene of torture, and Belle felt sick at the stomach. How could anyone be so cold and cruel as this woman?

Taking a deep breath and focusing, Belle started with a light strike, knowing that if she tried to go hard from the start the Queen may grow suspicious. After a few light swings, the Queen narrowed her eyes at Belle and her cold voice cut through the whizzing sound of the whip.

"You finished the warm-up girl, now stop playing or I will have to do it myself!" Belle nodded at the Queen with a fearful expression, and another swipe she took longer and it hit harder. Rumplestiltskin whimpered slightly when the whip made harsher contact with the wounds from the previous day, but otherwise he stayed impassive. Belle gulped, remembering what he had told her to do, and trying to stifle her tears she took another hard swing, and then another, and another. Before she knew it, the tears broke free and started streaming down her face, and she glanced briefly at the Queen. She felt a hatred raising inside her upon seeing Queen's gleeful

expression, as she looked at Rumplestiltskin and the pain Belle was causing him. She had never hated any living person in her life, but she could say right now, that she definitely hated the Evil Queen.

Feeling the anger fill her, Belle used it to convey it into her hand, to make her strikes ever so harder. She tried to think of it with a cold mind, but she just couldn't help the horrible feeling of condemnation she felt towards herself. Managing by miracle to push away her restrictions, she used all the strength she had, hoping it will be over soon. Over the blood ringing in her ears, her head pulsing and tears obscuring her view, she could hear the Queen's laugh and joyful cheers, calling out to her and encouraging her to go on, faster, harder, and among Queen's self-enjoying voice and the sounds of the whip swinging through the air time after time, making hard contact with blood-stained skin, lacerating the flesh, she barely heard Rumplestiltskin's cries of pain, mingled with his own tears and growing into volume and frequency as more and more strikes followed. Belle felt as if she was gonna explode from inside out, when she suddenly heard Rumple's cried out plea.

"Stop it, Regina, please! Stop it!"

Rumplestiltskin begged her, crying and almost choking through the hot tears. He thought he would have to somewhat pretend to look truly defeated, but he didn't pretend at all; he was in such a horrible paralyzing pulsating pain, that he could barely breathe. It was definitely the worst pain he had ever endured, and part of him was proud of Belle, while the other part of him felt incredibly sorry that she had to do it.

He looked up at Regina, trying to see her clearly through his blurry eyes, and recognized the movement when she raised her hand, indicating for Belle to stop.

"Are you willing to finally give me what I want?"

"Yes."

He hung his head down, not only because he wanted to look completely resigned, but also his head hurt and he simply couldn't hold it upright anymore. He just managed to catch the glimpse of Regina's surprised face at the last moment, before his eyes met the dirty floor of the dungeon, and he blinked hard several times to get rid of the remaining tears.

After few seconds, he could hear Regina's footsteps and then her black leather-boots came into his vision as she stopped before him. Her fingers reached for his chin and raised it, forcing him to look at her. There was a suspicious look at her face, though satisfaction was starting to break through.

"Where is it?"

"I won't tell you, dearie. I want to make a deal." Regina hissed in anger and released his head with a harsh movement, stepping back from him. He kept a stern gaze, knowing that if he couldn't convince Regina to agree to accept the deal, and exactly on his terms, then their plan will be burned to ground, resulting most likely in Belle's eventual death.

"Do you really think you are in any position to make deals right now, Rumplestiltskin?"

"Indeed, I think I am, dearie." He poured into his voice all the confidence he could muster, trying to sound just like he always did, back when he was free and able to use magic, instead of tied up and bleeding. "If you want to get my dagger, then you have to make that deal."

Regina did not instantly refuse, and Rumple thought of it as a good sign. After few moments of pondering, she finally tilted her head at the side and nodded.

"Alright, I listen."

Rumple released a shuddering sigh, hoping Regina would think it's from the pain, instead from the relief. It was going good so far, and with a bit of luck, they both would soon be free, especially since Regina didn't appear to have overheard them in the morning. He tried not to get his hopes up too much, instead focusing his attention on the current task. He just had to lead the conversation in the right wayâ€|

"Belle knows where the dagger is and knows how to get it. She is the only person able to do it, I made sure of that, so you can forget about tricks Regina. The deal is simple. You free me from those shackles, and you let Belle go. She fetches the dagger, comes back and hands the dagger to you, but _only _does it here - I need to see that she's not hurt and that she leaves this place safely. After she hands the dagger to you, you will whisk her back to her home and show me on the mirror that you really did that. Then - you can do with me whatever you please." He looked at Regina, trying to gauge her reaction, but she didn't let any emotion cross her features. She looked as cold and calculating as her mother, he noticed discontented.

Finally, he saw a gleam in her eye and knew she swallowed the bait.

"So, that's all you want? Your maid is safely returned home, and for that I can have your dagger?"

"Yes. No loopholes Regina. I am simply tired of this fight, and I won't put Belle through it. You won." Regina's expression turned into a satisfied smirk, and with her glee at the prospect of finally getting what she wanted, she didn't seem to even consider that it may just be a part of the escape plan.

"Fine, imp. We have a deal."

"I knew you will be reasonable, dearie. Oh, and one more thing Regina: do not try to trick me. Belle is well instructed and believe me, if you try to pull a trick and break the conditions of our deal, you will never get your hands on that dagger."

Regina seemed displeased by it, but she nodded in agreement nevertheless. She looked at him for a few more moments, and he upheld her stare with his own unwavering one, all the while biting the inside of his cheek to keep his face impassive. They were so

closeâ€|

Eventually, Regina waved her hand and the shackles opened, Rumplestiltskin falling on the ground, his legs still too weak to support him. Queen's eyes turned at Belle, who was standing few feet behind Rump, quiet and motionless this entire time.

"You have one week to return here. If you aren't here by then or you simply try to run away, I will track you down and kill you; and it will be a long and painful death, trust me on that, girl."

"I understandâ€| yourâ€| your majesty." Belle barely was able to get the title through her mouth, but she knew she had to address the Queen properly, as to not anger her.

With a satisfied smirk and a wave of hand, Regina opened the door and mentioned for Belle to go.

Belle cast one last look at Rump, who brought himself into a somewhat sitting position, and seeing his small encouraging smile and trusting eyes, gave her courage. She could do this; she would get the dagger, and she would free Rump, and then they could return to their home and forget all this nightmare. Maybe they would even finally get the chance to be together?

Anew hope spurting out in her, she turned away from Rumplestiltskin and left the cell. She had only one week. _Only one weekâ€|_

4. I won't let you down

****Summary:** Belle goes to the Dark Castle on her quest to retrieve the dagger. Will she be able to succeed and save Rump, or will Regina be victorious?******

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****Author's note:** It's the last chapter. Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed the story.
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The bright beams of the midday sunlight streamed through the crowns of trees, warming the air pleasantly, as the soft wind tousled her hair and blew into her face. The forest was calm and quiet, the life just starting to wake up, and the only hearable thing in the distance were the hooves rhythmically hitting the ground, as Belle galloped slowly along the empty road.

She thought it was truly lucky that the Evil Queen allowed her to take one of her horses; Belle really didn't know how otherwise she could possibly make it back on time. Right now, she still had two days left, and being pretty close to the Queen's castle, she let her tired mare gallop on a leisure pace. For the past days she was trying to stay focused on the task so much, that until now she didn't allow her thoughts to wander. Remember Rumplestiltskin's words, find the dagger, go back to the Evil Queen's castle - that was all she let herself think about. But now, that she got what she needed, and she

had some time to spare, she could relax a bit and finally catch a breath. As she slowed the mare even more, her thoughts wandered off to few days ago.

She'd been harrying up so much, that she only stopped upon reaching the Dark Castle's gates. After unsaddling the horse and tying it up to the tree, knowing it couldn't cross through the barrier with her, she had entered the grounds. If not for the fact that Rumple had told her about the magical wards, she wouldn't have even realized there were any, the pendant allowing her such a clear passage that she didn't feel any tingle of magic.

As soon as she came through the gates, Belle thought for a moment about all the vague things he had told her. Only one of those things sounded clear to her so far, and she threw herself into a run, aiming straight for Rumplestiltskin's work tower. He told her to find a particular book, and she remembered the look of it very clearly. One day, she was helping him dry that book after she had caused him to spill a potion over it, and she did take a glimpse at the cover; she was sure to never forget the beautiful golden engravings decorating it. She didn't however know where to look for the book, the tower full of bookshelves filled with hundreds of volumes, and it took her a whole evening before she had finally found the right one. Too tired to read it, she fell asleep at the cot he kept in the room.

The next day, she started less erratic; making herself a cup of tea and a breakfast, knowing that Rumple wouldn't be pleased that she was neglecting her health. While eating she was looking through the book, the spells there of various subjects but nothing that could be of use to her. She tried to think back to Rumple's words. "She may follow you and try to take the dagger from you. That's why you need to remember of that book Belle." "Yes, but what spell should she use to prevent the Queen from doing it? Belle sighed in frustration, flipping the page annoyingly, and a second later almost choked on her tea when her eyes fell on the spell titled: "Transfiguration: How to change an object into another." She quickly scanned the page, her eyes sliding over the detailed instructions on changing a chosen object into whatever you wanted, and another set of instructions explaining how to change the transfigured object back to its previous form. Almost squeaking in joy, she was sure that this had to be the right spell. She could turn the dagger into something else, and even if the Evil Queen would have tracked her down, she wouldn't have an idea where the dagger really is.

Feeling much more optimistic than when she first started to look through the book, she finished the tea and closed her eyes, thinking to the other things Rumple had told her, trying to remember his exact words.

"The key is hidden where our first memory is hidden too" - she recalled Rumple's voice, telling her this in a heated whisper, and she felt tears prick her eyes, realizing that he was there alone again, relying only upon her to save him. She quickly shook her head to clear it, and focused on the riddle he had given her.

She spent several long hours mulling it over, until by the noon, when she entered the living room and perched herself at the table, her focused thoughts had finally escaped her; and as she looked down at the table and a single ornate chair standing by it, her memories

brought her back to her first days in the castle. She remembered giving him tea for the first time, her nervousness eating her up. He had been listing her duties, when at one point he made a tasteless joke about skinning babies. Belle smiled at the memory, remembering how it had terrified her, causing her to drop the cup she's been holding, and remembering his delighted giggle when he told her that it was just a quip. She remembered the relief rushing through her, and then the fear of meeting his anger as she realized the cup had chipped. He had merely shrugged it off, said that _"It's just a cup."_ He had always drank from it since then, as if the cup hold meaning to him, as ifâ€¦ Belle suddenly threw herself upwards. That was it! The cup - that was their first memory! She jumped to her feet and ran down the stairs to the kitchens, opening the small cabinet, where she knew he kept the chipped cup, among other crockery. She took it out reverently, cradling in her hands for a moment, before remembering what she was really looking for: a key. Putting the cup back into place, she searched the cabinet, moving carefully all the cups and saucers, until her hands fell upon a small round box, hidden at the end corner, where she had never noticed it. As she opened the box, inside it there was a key. Feeling joyous at things going good thus far, she quickly thought back to his instructions.

Realizing what she needs to do next, she clutched the key in her palm and run up to his tower. Once inside, she directed her steps towards the desk, and as she opened the drawer, she saw the ebony wooden box lying there, just like Rumple had mentioned. Taking it out, she put the key into the hole, and it fit perfectly, opening the box with an audible _click_. _And indeed, true to Rumple's words - there was a vial inside, and Belle tentatively took it, holding it between her fingers and rising up to her face. A red liquid floated in it, and Belle felt her stomach churned as her mind supplied what it could be. _Bloodâ€¦_ She quickly dropped her hand, taking the vial away from her sight, and remembering his instructions on what to do with it, she directed her steps to the west wing, where she knew just next to his bedroom was the sealed room, the one she was previously forbidden to enter under any circumstances. Having in mind what Rumple had told her about her pendant, she reached for the knob, still almost jumping when the door creaked slightly and opened without any resistance. With a feeling as if she was doing something forbidden, she entered the room. It was completely dark, and as she set her foot inside, suddenly the candlesticks on the walls flared to life, illuminating the entire room in a soft orange glow, giving a soft hiss as they did so. Belle's heart jumped up to her throat, and she almost fled the room. She realized she had taken a step back, and reminded herself that Rumple allowed her to walk inside this room. He wouldn't have let her do it, if it posed any danger, she told herself, trying to calm her racing heart.

As she slowly looked around her, she realized that the room was completely empty, save for one thing; a pedestal standing in the middle, and a rectangular box resting atop it. It looked innocent enough, just a pedestal, just a boxâ€¦ and yet, a cold shiver ran down Belle's back as she started to approach closer. It seemed like there was an evil power inside the room, floating around in the air, spreading out from the wooden gold-painted box. She felt the magic surround her, and she jumped when the door suddenly closed behind her with a loud _bang_. Panic beginning to overtake her, she started to chant aloud that she trusts Rumple, that he wouldn't send her right into the danger's hands, that nothing bad would happenâ€¦

Standing by the pedestal, she reached for the box with shaking hands, rising the lid. It suddenly disappeared from her hands, and her eyes dropped down to the open box, beholding the dagger that lay inside it; metallic and long, with a dark strong handle and a curved blade, made whole from silver and with a black name engraved on it; name that read, _"Rumplestiltskin". _Belle gulped, looking at the object, and as she stared at it, Rumple's words suddenly flew out of her mind, the room seeming go dark again, and she could see just the dagger, illuminating in the soft light, emitting pleasant warmth, the air around her thick and engulfing her like a warm blanketâ€¦ Feeling a strange, irresistible pull, her hand raised, reaching for the blade. Her eyes unblinking, her lungs not breathing, she was so close, almost there, almost touching itâ€¦

The moment her fingers were about to touch the cold metal, the purple light engulfed the dagger and pushed her hand away. The force of it snapped Belle back from the strange trance, and she drew into a shaky breath; the room was bright again as she looked around it quickly - all the candles were lit up and air around her calm just as when she first entered the room. Though the vague feeling of evil lurking around didn't dissipate, she didn't feel that strange pull any longer, as if something was taking over her mind, making her move not of her own volition. Not wanting to think about what had actually happened, and with relief feeling that her mind was clear once again, she refocused on remembering Rumple's instructions.

The vial. She was supposed to pour it on the dagger.

Belle uncorked the vial and poured the red liquid over the dagger. She saw the light engulf it again and then the glow vanished, seemingly for good. Slowly, she reached for the blade, and this time her hand wasn't pushed away. Her fingers landed on the cold blade, and she traced the engraving carefully. Tentatively, as if it was made of a delicate porcelain, she reached for the handle and took the dagger from the box, bringing it up to her face and looking at it closely. She didn't know its exact power, but knew that it was the thing that would get Rumple free, and the thing that the Queen desired. Knowing she couldn't let the Queen get her hands on it, Belle put the empty vial on the pedestal and walked out of the dreadful room, realizing only after standing outside the door, that her body was covered in sweat. Her heart still thudded inside her chest, and she felt as if a big weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Not looking back at the room, she clutched the dagger in her hand and directed her steps downstairs, not even realizing she was almost running.

Setting herself at the table in the great hall and picking up the book she had previously found in Rumple's tower, she read the spell instructions with great care. After several readings through, she felt that she'd gotten a good understanding of how to cast the spell, and she stood up, setting the book aside, and looking at the dagger that lied peacefully on the table top. Taking a deep breath, she touched the blade with her forefinger and repeated the words from the book, focusing on the image of the object she wanted the dagger to turn into.

For a moment nothing happened, but then, the dagger started to quiver, and in front of Belle's eyes it began to change its shape, shrinking and twisting until it became a ring. Belle gasped. It workedâ€¦

Still feeling dazed, but also surprisingly elated, she reached for the ring, rising it to her face and examining. It was a simple design, an obsidian band with a silver strand embroidered into it, running through the top in a curved line. As she looked at the inside, there she saw engraved in a tiny letters the name _Rumplestiltskin. _It was definitely the transfigured dagger, and Belle could see the resemblance. She just hoped that if she was to encounter the Evil Queen before getting back to Rumple's cell, the woman wouldn't have made the connection and would just think of it as an ordinary ring.

Belle took off the simple ring she was currently wearing and put it on the table, slipping the dagger-ring onto its place. She marveled just for a moment on how perfectly it fit on her finger, and then picked up the book, focusing her whole attention on studying the counter spell. She had to make sure she had it memorized well, otherwise she would be stuck with the ring instead of the dagger, and not able to help Rumple.

When she was sure she had the spell memorized well enough, she went to put the book exactly where she had found it, and then came back down to the great hall. Leaning against the wall next to the excessively big door, for the first time since she had arrived here again - she truly looked around. The place looked abandoned. The straw lied in a heap by the spinning wheel, obviously not used from weeks. A thick layer of dust covered the table, being only a bit dispersed in the place where she had perched herself previously. The curtains were still open, Belle noticed happily, and he didn't even remove the settee he put in the room especially for her. When Belle looked at it, she noticed a book she had left open and half-read, as she was leavingâ€|

The tears welled up at her eyes, and she felt herself sliding down the wall, until her knees hit the cold floor, and she curled herself into a ball, dissolving into uncontrollable sobs. Why all this have to happen to them? Rumple didn't deserve to be held imprisoned and be torturedâ€| And if Regina tricks them or sniffs their deceit, who knows what horrible things she will inflict upon them, before killing Belle and forcing Rumple to do who knows what. _He doesn't deserve itâ€|_ And if she had just stayed, he would have not thought that she was dead, and would not have gone to look for her, and would not have fallen into Queen's trapâ€| Belle cried loudly, hugging her arms around herself, and feeling miserable knowing that right at that moment Rumple was in the dirty dungeon, shivering from cold and hurting from the bleeding wounds on his back, waiting for her to return and hoping as much as she did, that the plan will work and soon they both would be free from the Queen's clutches.

She didn't know how much time has passed, before her cries waned, and she was able to breathe normally, the hiccups not choking her anymore. Finally gathering herself into one piece and forcing not to cry anymore, she told herself to focus on the quest. Rumple needed her, and so she needed to be strong. Feeling the determination come back to her, she raised herself from the floor, and with one last look at the room she left, getting the horse ready and leaving the castle's grounds, heading towards the Queen's palace, and repeating to herself the promise she had made to him in the cell; _"I won't let you down, Rumple"._

I won't let you downâ€|

Presently, Belle was harshly torn away from her thoughts, as the sound of galloping horses reached her ears and made her realize that someone was approaching. Startled, she eased her horse down from a gallop, and encouraged the mare to trot into the dense forest. She hid with the horse behind the thick trees, hoping that whoever was coming wouldn't notice her.

Two black horses came into her view, and then a carriage. Belle squinted her eyes at it; she recognized that carriage. It was the same that had stopped her at that disastrous day, when Rumple send her to the village to gather some straw for him; the Evil Queen emerging from it and using Belle's lack of knowledge of her identity to convince her to try using True Love's kiss on Rumple. The kiss that did work for them, and caused Rumple to believe that she had worked with the Queen and wanted to strip him of his powers; the kiss that had caused him to banish her from the castleâ€| Belle shook herself out from the memories, and focused at the sight before her.

The horses rushed through the road and disappeared around the corner, the thick line of trees obscuring them from view, and the carriage hurried down after them, two more horses galloping behind, guarding the backs. After they all disappeared from Belle's view, and she couldn't even hear the tap of their hooves anymore, she rushed her horse forward, urging it into wild gallop, hoping to get to the castle while the Queen was away. It briefly crossed her mind that it could be a trick; why would the Queen be rushing out of the castle if she was expecting Belle to return any moment? But she didn't think much of it; from what she has learned about the Evil Queen in her absence from the Dark Castle, she knew that nothing was more important to her than getting revenge on the woman called Snow White. It was probable that she had heard some new news of her whereabouts, and decided that this was more pressing matter, than the man currently occupying her dungeon.

Few hours later, when Belle finally reached the Dark Palace's gates, she realized there were no soldiers guarding it. That surprised Belle a bit, but she didn't stop to start dwelling on it, instead hurrying inside the castle. She remembered the way the guards had dragged her the previous time, and so she followed the dark corridors, guided by the unpleasant memory. The palace was quiet and empty, unlike the last time when they had run into several patrolling guards. Belle had no time to stop and wonder over it though, as she reached the levels of the dungeons, and after looking around and seeing no guards, she rushed to the cell where Rumple was being held.

"Rumple!" She whispered frantically, afraid that someone would hear her, even if the place seemed rather desolated. Could it be that their escape would be much easier than they had anticipated?

"Belle?" His slim figure appeared behind the bars and he leaned his forehead against them, looking at her with a surprised expression. "How did you get here? Where's Regina?" He tried to look around her, but the bars prevented him from seeing much.

"I've seen her leaving the castle. It looks like her guards left too. We have a chance, Rumple!" She almost raised her voice, and quickly

she lowered it down again. Rumple looked at her blankly for a moment, before he stirred.

"You have it?"

Belle looked around carefully once more, making sure they were alone, and then slipped the ring from her finger, placing it on her open palm and trying to remember the spell. The words clear in her mind, she quietly whispered them, watching in astonishment as the small grey cloud engulfed the ring, and feeling as it started to grow on her palm. When the cloud dissipated, it was no longer a ring laying on her hand, but the dagger. Belle barely stopped herself from squeaking in delight, and looked up at Rumple, who was now staring at her with a proud expression on his face.

"I knew you could do this, sweetheart."

Belle couldn't stop the blush from creeping up onto her face at his words, and she shook her head at him.

"Give me your hand, Rumple."

He nodded and quickly lifted his right arm, pressing his wrist against the bars the best he could. Belle raised the dagger, carefully putting the blade against the cuff, and holding her breath, she moved the blade over it with one swift movement. The bracelet came apart and fell from his wrist, landing on the floor, as he took his hand away from the bars to look at his free wrist in astonishment. There was a small trickle of blood where the blade had made contact with his skin, Belle accidentally cutting a bit too deeply, but he paid it no mind. He was free.

Belle grinned at him, happy that it worked, but suddenly, an unspeakable cold pierced her heart, as an invisible force pushed her, making her fly in the air and hit the wall.

"You foolish girl, I knew you would try to trick me!" The Queen yelled at her, having appeared at the dungeon's corridor out of thin air and holding her hand outstretched, keeping Belle pinned to the wall with her magic. She twisted her wrist and Belle felt herself loosing breath, an invisible force squeezing her throat and strangling her.

"You thought it will be so simple to deceive me?! You stupid little wench!" Regina made her way closer to Belle, her gait dangerous and eyes flashing in fury, and Belle instinctively raised her hand in defense, the dagger still clutched there. Queen's eyes fell upon it, and her expression turned so covetous, Belle felt her heart ceasing its beating for a long second.

She could barely breathe, the invisible claws cutting off her access to air, and tears welled up in her eyes as the prospect of dying and letting Rumple down came into her mind. The Queen was getting closer and closer, and all Belle could think of, was that she could not get her hands on that dagger.

Suddenly, the Queen stopped dead in her tracks, and Belle watched with wide eyes as Rumple appeared behind her, clad in his famous leathers and silks, looking nothing like he had just spent days imprisoned in a dungeon. Belle watched dumbfounded as he shot his arm

forward, the Queen letting out a short whimper of surprise combined with pain. And then Rumplestiltskin stepped aside and, to her shock, Belle could see a black heart lying in his hand. Regina half-turned to him with disbelief and anger painting her features.

"What have you done?!"

"Release her." He said tersely, and Regina's hand moved of its own volition, removing the enchantment from Belle. She collapsed on her knees, grasping at her throat as she tried frantically to draw in breath.

"Now, now, dearie. It seems that we did manage to trick you, after all." He giggled with his strange impish laugh, and Belle has never felt happier to hear it. She saw him cast a quick worried glance at her, but after she gave him a reassuring smile, he returned his attention back to Regina. His features darkened suddenly, as he loomed over her, seething in anger.

"I will make you pay for everything, dearie! For lying to me about Belle dying, for drawing me into a trap, for imprisoning me, for kidnapping Belle, for forcing her to torture me, and for trying to strangle her just now. You will pay for all this! I will crush your dark heart, turn it into a dust, and then turn your dead body into dust too!"

Belle looked at him fearfully, never before seeing him look so furious, so enraged. She had seen his tantrums on multiple times, but never had he looked so feral, so dangerous, so ready to torture and murder with cold blood. Feeling chills run down her spine and fear engulf her heart, she quickly drew herself up and walked over to him, just as he was about to squeeze the hand that was holding the Queens heart.

"Rumple, please, wait!" He looked at her with blazed eyes, and having his attention, Belle quickly grasped his free hand. "Don't kill her Rumple, please."

"What?! After all she has done to me, to us?!" His darkened wide pupils focused more clearly on her, the blinding fury leaving place for disbelief, and Belle shook her head slightly, squeezing his hand harder.

"I know what she did to us, and I hate her for that. But it doesn't mean you have to kill her. You're better than her, Rumple."

"No, Belle, I'm not." For a brief second a look of sadness crossed over his crude features, but it quickly dissipated, his eyes narrowing and face once more determined. "No one crosses the Dark One like that and gets away unpunished."

Belle knew she wasn't getting through to him. Regina's claws cut too deeply for Belle to be able to convince him to just leave. As she was about to give up and turn her back on what Rumple was going to do, an idea struck her, and she quickly jerked at his arm to draw his attention back to her.

"You don't have to kill her!"

"Belle!"

"No, listen! Use the cuff, Rumpel. You can put it on her and enchant it the way she did, and then she won't be able to use her magic ever again."

Rumplestiltskin looked at her for a very long moment, considering her words carefully. His eyes kept switching from Belle's face, to the heart in his hand, to Regina's stilled expression.

He wanted to kill her, he wanted to do it so muchâ€¦ But maybe Belle was right. There could be a better punishment for Regina, than simply killing her. And without magic, she would lose her throne, Snow White easily reclaiming it; she would have to live as a peasant, possibly getting banished from the kingdom, and being stripped of her revenge and magic would have driven her mad. Yes, that could be a nice punishment indeedâ€¦ But not enough to stop her, he realized. Even without magic, there would still be plenty of ways for her to hurt people. There had to be more done, something that would stop her terror permanently.

"Even without magic, she still could hurt people, Belle." He voiced his thoughts, as he looked down at Belle. Her brow creased as she realized he was right.

"But in what other way we can stop her?"

He sighed, casting his eyes down, and they fell upon the black heart still clutched in his hand. As he kept staring at it, an idea suddenly occurred to him. Without a word, he moved away from Belle's grasping hands and walked into the cell, fishing up the broken cuff from the floor. He was so focused on his task, that he didn't even notice Belle's confused expression, as her eyes followed his every movement, wondering what was he planning to do.

Leaving the cell, he approached Regina, standing right before her and eyeing her with a cruel smirk on his lips.

"Give me your hand." He commanded, Regina's eyes narrowing and fury flashing in them, as her arm moved forward and she could do nothing to stop it. He grabbed her forearm with purposefully too much force, eliciting a sharp hiss from her, and swiftly put the cuff around her wrist. As he made sure it wouldn't slip, he moved his hand over the broken piece, mending it back together, the cuff beaming in a soft light for a second, as its power activated. After the gleam had faded, Rumplestiltskin moved his hand once more, casting a protection spell over the cuff.

"Now, dearie. Thanks to this spell, only I would be able to take this cuff off, but of course, I will never do that." He giggled gleefully at her furious expression. She could just stand there and stare, not able to do anything while he was holding her heart. "You will spend the rest of your miserable life, living among common people and never using magic again. But, that's not all, Regina. You seeâ€¦ I will not be returning your heart to you." Her eyes widened upon hearing that, and Rumplestiltskin leaned closer to her with a sneer, trying to intimidate her the best he could.

"You will never kill or torture anyone ever again. You will never do anything to hurt Belle, or me, neither directly nor indirectly. You will forego your revenge on Snow White, you will stop terrorizing

people in Enchanted Forest, and you will stop slaughtering the villages. You will also not use other people to do any of those things for you. Oh, and you will release all the people that you had imprisoned, and you will return all the hearts to their rightful owners."

He made a brief pause, wondering if he had covered all grounds. Not able to think of anything else to add at the moment, he narrowed his eyes at Regina, giving her his most threatening look.

"And remember, I will keep an eye on you, so if you try something shady, I will come after you. Is that understood?"

"You blasted imp! It's not over! You will regret this!" Regina glared at him, but being so close to her face, he could also recognize the fear in her eyes, the downing feeling of defeat and absolute powerlessness. With a wave of his hand, a wooden box appeared in his hand, and he carefully put Regina's heart into it, sealing the lid with a protection spell, and sending the box back to his castle in a puff of purple smoke.

Eventually, he took a step back from the seething former Evil Queen, only now realizing that he didn't present his plan to Belle and didn't know what she thought of it. Panic creeping up at him, at the prospect that he might have disappointed her or angered her, he slowly turned around. His heart sank, as he noted her displeased expression, blue eyes scowling at him. Apprehensively, he started to walk towards her.

"There has to be another wayâ€|" She started as he neared her, and he heaved a sigh.

"Belleâ€|"

"Without a heart, she will never be able to find happiness, she won't be able to understand her mistakes and feel guilt, and she won't be able to redeem herself... There's gotta be another way." Belle insisted, grasping his calloused hand into her two small palms and squeezing.

"But there isn't. Regina will never stop until she kills Snow White, and even then, she will always try to destroy the happiness of other people. Maybe she would find her own happiness along the way, but how many victims of her cruelty would have fallen under her boot, before that happens? No, Belleâ€|" The only way to stop her terror, is to forbid her from sowing it, and that can only be done by taking away her heart." He explained, willing Belle to understand. He knew that if she won't, he still wouldn't have changed his mind about taking Regina's heart. And the last he wanted, was for Belle to leave again, after he had just gotten her back.

Finally, he saw her eyes lose their determination, and she slowly nodded her head, casting a quick glance towards Regina.

"You're right... Stopping her from hurting anyone else, is the priority. And if that's truly the only wayâ€|" She sighed resignedly, and he rubbed his thumb over the soft skin of her palm in a comforting manner. He couldn't understand why it would matter to her to give Regina a chance to possibly find happiness in the future or even redeem herself, but he could see that the thought of that never

happening, was saddening her.

"Can we go home now?" She looked up at him pleadingly, and he forced a tight smile on his lips, as he nodded affirmatively. With her warm smile answering him, she wrapped her arms around his waist, her face snuggling against his chest, causing his breath to stutter for a moment. His arm tentatively encircled her back, and he rested his cheek against Belle's hair, breathing deeply.

Thinking back to the last several frantic minutes, he briefly wondered why she didn't use the dagger to stop him from killing Regina, until he realized Belle didn't know the exact power the dagger had. He wasn't sure he would mind all that much, if she was to get to know the truth. She had saved him after all, and he owed her his life and soul.

His arm squeezed her stronger in his embrace, as he realized that it was finally over, that they were truly free. They could return home and put this nightmare behind them. Relief and happiness washing over him, he drew her even closer, relishing in her warmth. Holding her steadily, he waved his free hand in the air, and closed his eyes against her chestnut curls.

The next moment, his eyes opened, and they were standing in the great hall in the Dark Castle.

They stayed in their embrace for a long moment, until eventually, she moved away from him, and he looked at her in a quiet consternation, watching as she stepped to the table, carefully depositing the dagger there, and then making her way back to where he was standing. Before he could open his mouth to say something, she grasped his shoulders and bracing herself at them, she stood on her tiptoes and pressed a searing kiss against his cheek.

"I'm proud of you, Rumple. I knew you had it in you, the ability to not kill her." She said, her face staying so close to him, and he felt the biggest urge to kiss her mouth. Their last kiss ended up in a disaster, but he didn't care about it now. He had thought she was dead, but she wasn't; he thought she had been lost to him forever, but now she was in his arms; and all he wanted to do was to cradle her lovingly and kiss her till the end of the world.

His throat convulsed suddenly, as he realized something, and he felt emotion fill him entirely.

"Belle— You saved me. If it wasn't for you—" The tears came into his eyes and his voice cracked, but he tried to ignore it. "I owe you my life, Belle. More, I owe you my soul. Thank you, Belle—"

Belle looked at him with big eyes, that quickly filled to the brim with tears. His words, combined with the horrors of the past days, caused her to break down again. She thought she had it all cried out after her crying in here, just over a day ago, but apparently, she was wrong. Her body convulsed as she started sobbing, and the tears ran freely down her cheeks. Rumple's heart clutched at the sight, and without a second thought he opened his arms for her. Belle immediately walked into his embrace, putting her hands around his middle and resting her head against his heart, just like that night in the Queen's dungeon. And as much as then, she couldn't stop the crying, her weeping only growing into strength, and soon hiccups

overtook her.

This time, Rumple didn't keep in his own tears, and let them escape his eyes; he allowed himself to let go of all the emotions that he'd been suppressing within himself since Regina had imprisoned him. Crying silently into her hair, he stroked her shaking back, uttering wobbly words of comfort and kissing her hair softly, and she mumbled her own soothing words against his chest too, but he was not able to understand them, not more that she was able understand his.

They were both soon a sobbing, shaking, crying mess, clinging to each other desperately, until after many minutes the tears have finally dried out from their bodies, and their breathing had calmed down. He felt strangely empty then, but Belle was left feeling simply exhausted. Not moving away from his warm comforting embrace, she raised her head to look up at him.

"Can we go to bed, Rumple?" He nodded at her with a small smile, and she pressed her cheek back against his chest. Feeling incredibly tired, she closed her eyes and didn't even notice when the purple smoke engulfed them, and they were now standing in her old bedroom.

Rumplestiltskin could see that she was already half-asleep, the exhaustion and tension wearing her down, and so he scooped her up into his arms, carrying her to the bed. Her eyes didn't open as he did that, and he carefully lied her down at the bed, covering her with the warm quilt. Only then did he dare to use magic, changing her dress into a nightgown.

He looked at her for a moment, the sight of her face filling his heart with warmth, before he finally found enough strength in himself to turn around. He was just making a first step away from the bed, when suddenly her delicate fingers wrapped around his hand, stopping him.

"Rumpleâ€¦ Don't leave. Pleaseâ€¦" He turned back to her, noticing her wide eyes and quavering lip. His heart bled at how fragile and vulnerable she looked right now.

"I won't leave." He assured her, and when her worried expression relaxed and she moved to the other side of the bed, lifting up the covers and patting the space she had just made, he gave in and carefully lied down next to her. As soon as he did that, she moved closer to him, and put her head against his shoulder, breathing deeply, as if for the first time since this nightmare had started, she was able to take a free breath.

Rumple readjusted the quilt and twisted his wrist, magically changing into his white nightshirt, and then tenderly put his arms around Belle. She was so soft and warm and pliable in his embrace, unable to stop himself, he snuggled closer, running his hands over her bare arms and the back covered only by the thin satin. He heard Belle's contented sigh, as her own arms adjusted around him comfortably, and soon her breathing slowed down as she fell asleep.

Rumple kept stroking her soft skin for a few more minutes, resting his face against the top of her head and breathing calmly. The last weeks have been almost surreal to him; hearing that Belle killed herself, searching for her living form but unable to find it,

eventually believing Regina and stupidly falling into her trap, ending up being imprisoned, and then finding out Belle was alive all alongâ€¦ If he hadn't been such an idiot as to throw her out, he would've had her at his side all this time, and never have ended in Regina's dungeon, and Belle would have never been forced toâ€¦ He let out an exaggerated sigh. It didn't matter now. What mattered, was that they were both safe now. He would be more careful in the future, but more importantly, he wouldn't let any more harm come to his Belle. He would keep her safe.

He kissed her head, snuggling her closer in his arms.

"I will protect you, sweetheart. I promise." He whispered into her hair, his breath ragged as a single tear escaped him.

No one will ever put his darling Belle through such a hell again. _No one. _He won't let them.

With this new determination, he kissed her hair once more and closed his eyes, resting his chin against her. With his magic back, he knew he wouldn't fall asleep, not without drinking a sleeping potion, but it didn't matter. He could just close his eyes for a moment and restâ€¦ And maybe when they wake up, everything will be brighter.

****THE END****

End
file.